DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 005 FL 017 801

AUTHOR Lucas, Tamara
TITLE Beyond Language "and" Culture: Individual Variation in Students' Engagement with a Written Genre.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (22nd, Chicago, IL, March 8-13, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Students; Case Studies; Cultural Background; *English (Second Language); Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Individual Differences; *Journal Writing; Second Language Instruction; Sociocultural Patterns; *Student Journals

ABSTRACT

A study examined the role of individual differences in the journal writing of adult students of English as a second language (ESL). Subjects were nine students from six countries enrolled in two university ESL writing classes. The primary writing activity was personal journal writing that required description and examination of the students' past experiences. Data were drawn from two questionnaires, notes and audiotapes of classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and teacher and student journal writing. Writing samples were analyzed for five features: functions (representational and reflective), content, audience, organizational form, and linguistic form. Although the subjects were treated as case studies, writing samples were compared for different treatments or combinations of the five features. Overall, the findings indicated that individual differences such as past writing experience and personality had a greater influence than cultural background on students' approaches to the journal writing task. Teachers are cautioned against over-reliance on cultural values and customs to explain student behavior and learning. (Author/MSE)

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Beyond Language and Culture:

Individual Variation in Students' Engagement with a Written Genre

Tamara Lucas, Ph.D.

Southwest Center For Educational Equity

ARC Associates, Inc.

Oakland, California

Paper presented at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention, March 1988, Chicago

Submitted for publication to *TESOL Quarterly*, January 1989

FL 017801

Abstract

Teachers of students from sociocultural backgrounds different from their own must, on the one hand, recognize sociocultural influences on their students and, on the other, remember that students are also individuals. This article examines the role of individual differences in the journal writing of adult ESL students and recommends that teachers use caution in applying sociocultural generalizations to explain students' writing behavior. The study was conducted in an extended education ESL writing class team-taught for two ten-week semesters at a large urban university. The primary writing activity was personal journal writing requiring description and examination of the writers' past experiences. The subjects were nine students from six countries, who served as case study subjects, and two teachers for each semester. Data consisted of student questionnaires, fieldnotes and audiotapes of classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and teacher and student journal writing. After describing the conventions of the genre and the backgrounds of the nine subjects, the article focuses on how the students responded to the writing and influences on those responses. The findings indicate that individual differences such as past writing experiences and personality had a greater influence than cultural background on students' approaches to the journal writing.

BEYOND LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH A WRITTEN GENRE

The rainbow and the patchwork quilt have come to be seen as more appropriate metaphors for the pluralistic population that constitutes the United States than the melting pot of earlier years. Just as that outmoded metaphor does not describe the people of different colors and traditions that inhabit the U.S., it also does not capture the students with individual needs and experiences who inhabit classrooms. Students of the same age from the same country may have had very different educational and life experiences; one may have attended school regularly until she emigrated to the U.S. with her family, while another may have never learned to read and write in his first language before he was sent to the U.S. alone to avoid being forced into military service.

Such individual differences among students challenge teachers and educational researchers alike. Teachers are required to teach to groups of students, often very large groups of them, which means that they have very little time and energy to determine each student's learning style and needs, much less to orchestrate their teaching so that it is synchronous with them. Too often, the most well-intended lesson does not engage the majority of students in a class. Like dancers of different eras, teachers and students struggle to get in step with each other. While a teacher is doing a tango with a few students, others must wait to waltz, jitterbug, twist, or slam-dance.

Researchers in the field of second language acquisition also struggle with the role of individual differences in language learning. They disagree about the importance of individual factors and find it difficult to identify and classify them. Researchers examining second language acquisition among adolescent and adult learners in classrooms tend to find that individual variation plays a major role, while those studying child second language acquisition in naturalistic settings downplay the role of individual differences (Fillmore,

1979). Even when approached with sophisticated statistical analyses, individual differences do not disappear. In reality, students' ages, past experiences, attitudes, and aptitudes do not converge toward a mean. They remain stubbornly individual.

Despite their differences, applied linguists generally recognize that individual differences play some role in language acquisition (see Ellis, 1987 for a review of the literature). Age is the most frequently cited individual factor influencing second language acquisition (e.g., see Hatch, 1983; McLaughlin, 1987; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978). The effect of age on second language learning appears to be more complex and multidimensional than the truism that younger people learn a second language more easily than older ones. Cognitive and affective factors interact with age to mediate its effects in various ways (see Ellis, 1987). Other individual factors associated with language acquisition include personality (Dulay et al., 1982; Schumann, 1978; Strong, 1983), aptitude (Gardner, 1980), motivation for learning the language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), attitudes toward the second language and its culture (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), and learning styles (Naiman et al., 1978; Hansen & Stansfield, 1981). Desire for social integration, communication needs, attitude, and education have been considered together as components of the general "propensity" by which a person is induced to "apply his [sic] language faculty to acquiring a language" (Klein, 1987, p.35).

In a longitudinal study of children learning English as a second language, Fillmore (1979, 1983) could not ignore individual differences although she had not set out to examine them. She found differences among the children in language learning styles and social styles and found that these interacted with situational variables in different ways.

> The individual differences found in the learning of a second language by the five children in this [part of the] study had to do with the nature of the task, the sets of strategies they needed to apply in dealing with it, and the way certain personal characteristics such as language habits, motivations, social needs and habitual approaches to problems affected the way they attacked it. They differed greatly in

> such characteristics, and in the course of the study year, it became quite apparent that it was the interaction of all these factors that produced the observed differences in the rate at which they learned the new language (1979, p.220).

Despite the research that has been conducted in these areas, more questions than answers remain regarding definitions and identification of individual factors and their influences on second language learning. As the dates of many of these citations suggest, interest in the influence of individual differences on language learning among applied linguists has waned in recent years. Besides encountering difficulties in identifying them and separating one from another, researchers have been frustrated by the unlikelihood of designing effective interventions to influence them. Little attention at any time has been focused on the role of individual differences in literacy learning, though it has been taken into account by some writers (e.g., Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Hudelson, 1986). The examinations of highly individual case studies of writers (e.g., Calkins, 1979, 1980; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1981; Perl, 1979), undertaken as the paradigm was shifting to a process-oriented view of writing, tended to focus on elements of subjects' writing processes that could be generalized to other writers--i.e., that could contribute to a description of "the writing process"--and could be incorporated into the writing classroom.

One particular manifestation of individual differences in second language acquisition as well as literacy learning for first and second language learners which has received some attention recently is the influence of previous knowledge and experience on learning. Specialists in both first and second language learning (Carrell, 1987; K. Goodman, et al., 1987; Krashen and Biber, 1988; Smith, 1986; Langer 1984; Langer and Applebee, 1986; Heath, 1983; and Michaels, 1981) argue that learners perform better and learn more quickly and successfully when they have some knowledge of and experience with what they are learning. Langer's findings (1984), for example, "suggest a strong and consistent relationship between topic-specific background knowledge and the quality of student writing" and indicate that "different kinds of knowledge predict success in different

writing tasks" (p. 41). A student who did not watch the coverage of the 1988 summer Olympics and has never heard of anabolic steroids, for example, would have a great deal of difficulty writing a coherent and convincing essay expressing his or her opinion about the use of such substances in sports and the justice of Canadian athlete Ben Johnson's loss of his gold medal--though I observed a class in which just such students were asked to write an essay on these issues. Though both make exceptionally good sense, neither the argument that prior knowledge is crucial to learning nor the information available on individual differences in language learning has typically had a great impact on teaching.

The Study

An ESL writing class provided me with the opportunity to examine the role of individual differences, including previous experiences, in literacy learning. Because none of the students had done the type of writing assigned in the class in a classroom context before, I was able to examine their processes of learning and adapting to a classroom genre about which they did not have many preconceived notions. They could not rely on previous classroom experiences with the genre to help them decide what the teacher "wanted," nor had they developed attitudes about the genre and strategies for approaching it. On the other hand, each of them had knowledge about life, themselves, school, and writing and had had experiences that influenced their learning of the genre. I found that the nine students whom I studied in depth adapted to the genre in different ways and that a variety of factors influenced those ways of adapting.

The setting for the study was an extended education English as a Second Language writing class, called Writing for Fluency, which was team-taught one evening a week for two ten-week semesters at a large urban university (for more detailed descriptions of the course, see Vanett and Jurich, in press a, in press b). The primary ongoing writing activity of these classes was classroom personal journal writing. Most of the writing, on topics assigned or suggested by the teachers, required the students to describe and examine their past experiences from various perspectives. Each week, the teachers also wrote a journal

entry on the same topics and distributed them to the students. As a result of their engagement in the writing, students reported increased confidence in their writing abilities, more commitment to improving their writing skills, and deepened understandings of themselves (see Lucas, in press).

The subjects for the study consisted of two teachers for each semester (three different teachers altogether because one teacher taught both semesters) and nine students from six different countries, who served as subjects for case studies. Four of the students were enrolled in other classes as well and five were not. The students, all females, were selected primarily on the basis of their interest in participating in the study. The data consisted of (1) a questionnaire distributed at the beginning of each semester; (2) fieldnotes, audiotapes, and course materials collected during observations of all twenty class meetings; (3) interviews with teachers and students; and (4) the journals written by both teachers and students.

The Writers

I examined all of the writing of the nine case study subjects and interviewed each of them three times during the ten-week course. As Figure 1 shows, their backgrounds and experiences were similar and different in ways that might lead us to predict similar and different ways in which they would respond to being asked to engage in this personal, reflective writing.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Seven of the students were Asian (three from Japan, two from Thailand, one from Vietnam, and one from the Philippines) and two were Hispanic (from Puerto Rico and El Salvador). All were adults, ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty-eight. Four were students who planned to return to their native countries and five were citizens or permanent residents who planned to remain in the U.S. The lengths of time they had been in the U.S. varied considerably--from one year for one of the Japanese students to nine years for a woman who had immigrated here from Thailand.

All were relatively well educated. Four held Bachelor's degrees from universities in their countries and four were juniors or seniors at the university where the research was conducted. The least educated and therefore least experienced with educational contexts was the woman from El Salvador, who had graduated from high school and taken a few courses as the local community college.

The ranges of experiences they had had with writing also varied. Five of them (Kimiko, Sita, Kaoru, Irene, and Raquel) had had extensive experience with self-motivated personal and imaginative writing (Applebee,1984, pp.14-16)--journals, poems, and stories. They spoke of the joy and fulfillment of writing. The other four students had written primarily out of obligation at school, at work, or to family and were more likely to describe writing as a chore than as a pleasure.

Conventions of the Genre

In addition to considering the students' backgrounds, I also examined the characteristics of the writing they were being asked to engage in--classroom personal journal writing. It is characterized by particular functions, content, audience, and organizational and linguistic form (see Figure 2). Here, I want to highlight those features which, taken together, distinguish this genre from other genres. They are the personal, reflective characteristics of the writing.

Figure 2

Features of Classroom Personal Journal Writing

1. **Functions**

•Representational - description of events, people, issues, and objects in the writer's life.

•Reflective - discussion of the influence and importance of events, people, issues, and objects in the writer's life.

2. **Content**

Personal experiences, ideas, and feelings of the writer.

3. **Audience**

The reader responds to the content of the writing only, not to form of correctness. The audience responds as an interested reader rather than an evaluator or "teacher."

4. **Organizational form**

Beginning - Identification of time, place, person, and theme.

Middle - Thematically unified description of event, person, issue, or object accompanied by some reflection on its significance for the writer.

End - Concluding reflection on the significance of the event, person, issue, or object described in the middle.

5. **Linguistic form**

•First-person singular predominates.

•The writer expresses his or her thoughts, feelings and attributes through three primary syntactic structures:

--first person subject + stative verb + adjective (noun)

Examples: I was scared. / I was a shy child.

--first person subject + mental verb + clause/phrase

Example: I assume that I missed my mother's attention to me.

--questions

Example: How could I do what was expected of me?

The combination of representational and reflective functions is one of those features. That is, writers describe events, people, objects, and issues in their lives and they also reflect on the influences on them and importance to them of those events, people, objects, and issues. In this way, the genre is very similar to personal journals written outside the classroom. The content also distinguishes this genre from most others, especially from other classroom genres. It is focused on the personal experiences and feelings of the writers. The audience for the genre (the teacher and occasionally other students) responds primarily to the content rather than to the form of the writing and does

not "correct" the entries, reacting as an interested reader rather than a teacher or evaluator. Though more and more classroom genres involve similar respondent(s), the predominant audience for school writing continues to be the teacher-as-evaluator (see Britton et al., 1975 and Applebee, 1981, 1984). Thus, the audience is another distinguishing feature of classroom personal journal writing. The element of organizational form that most distinguishes the genre is the reflection that typically occurs at the ends of entries on the meaning or significance to the writer of the event, person, object, or issue discussed in the middle. Finally, several linguistic features characterize the genre: in particular, the predominance of the first-person participant and the expression of the writer's thoughts, feelings, and attributes (i.e., reflection) through certain syntactic structures.

Two student journals written in response to the same assignment show how these conventions may be realized in student writing. The assignment asked the students to choose an important time in their lives, a time when something significant was happening to them, and to write about it in detail using a list of questions as guidelines. The questions asked the students to consider, for example, what and who were important to them, what their values were, how they felt about themselves, and what their situations were. The following two journals, reproduced without editing, were written in response to that assignment.

Sita, Journal #2 - 3/12/85

The tradgedies happended just about 3 months after I returned from 6 months in Thailand. I got a oversea phone call from one of my brother-in-law on Thursday evening in June 1984. I knew exactly what he would tell me when I answered the phone. My dad passed away! The funeral would held on the following Saturday. Eventhough I had only one night to decide that I should fly half world for the funeral or not, a few hours to buy air ticket and pack my suit case, I went anyway.

All my relatives were surprised to see me showed up because they didn't expect me to go back home since I've just left Bangkok 3 months ago.

It wasn't only I lost my dad, but for the 2 weeks I was there my second older sister had a blood clod in her brain which caused the left side of her body paralized! In addition to that one of my close friends had personnel problem that she considered taking her own life!

I felt overwhelm by tredgedies that I was so valnerable as if I were in all that experiences myself. I felt so helpless, miserable, and old.

When I arrived to Bangkok I was already psysically and mentally tried and I wasn't able to gain my strength back even after 3 months that I returned back to San Francisco.

Each time that I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a sad and tried face which over shadow by misery. I didn't just look old, I also felt old. The tradgedies hit me so hard at the same time from three different ways. There fore the impact was almost too difficult and painful to bear.

As I gradually recuperated, I went through the deep contemplations. I have changed so much now than last year. Because of this traumatic experiences, the tremendous force made me to become a mature person.

Alicia, Journal #3 - 10/14/85

When I was 8 years old, I liked to be in shows that the school use to give for Mother's Day and Independence Day, I used to recite and dance I enjoyed doing that very much, all the kits in the school and their parents liked the way that I acted. At the time I was living in one of San Salvador's Town, a beutiful town, My parents liked too. The only thing that my Father did not like was all the make up that I did have to wear to look pretty. I remember one time a friend from school polished my nails when I got home my father saw them, he got so angry that he made me to take the polish off. I never did that again. At the time my preorities were my books earn the best grades, tried to be one of the best students

on class, goal that I always achieved, my religious commitment was attended to church every Sunday with my parents at that time I belonged to Girl Scouts, my favorite clothes was to wear mini skirts, my favorite music oh I loved to listen rock and roll, my hobbies swim and read stories and my favorite food it always been seafood

These two students obviously responded to the same assignment with very different approaches even though they had received the same instructions and preparation in the class and they were roughly comparable in English proficiency. Sita reflected more on her feelings and thoughts and on the significance of events throughout her piece as well as at the end, while Alicia simply made a series of statements about things she used to like to do. Contrasts like these emerged in the journal writing of the nine writers, allowing me to distinguish among different ways of adapting to the writing conventions.

Ways of Adapting to the Genre Conventions

In fact, the students adapted quite differently to being asked to do this type of writing (see Lucas, in press, for a more thorough discussion). One student (Sita) embraced the genre. She expressed no difficulty in adapting to it and followed the conventions to a greater extent in her writing than did the other eight students. Five students struggled in different ways with the fact that they had an audience beyond themselves for this very personal writing, but all ultimately adopted the conventions at different times and in different ways. Three of them (Raquel, Keiko, and Kimiko) struggled with the fact that the writing required them to disclose their personal experiences and feelings to an outside audience. A fourth student (Kaoru) found it difficult to write about personal experiences and feelings to an audience other than herself, not because of the self-disclosure involved but because of the need to describe and explain her experiences and feelings more clearly than she would do for herself. The fifth student (Irene) reported no difficulty with the writing but did not, in fact, follow most of the personal, reflective conventions until her seventh journal, the assignment for which elicited an entry about her

escape from Vietnam by boat as a teenager. Two students (Sunee and Alicia) developed their own agenda for the writing, following some of the conventions but not most of those involving highly personal content and reflection. Of these two, Alicia reported having difficulty with the personal nature of the writing, and Sunee did not. Finally, one student (Elizabeth) tried to adopt the conventions of the genre but then opted out of the class entirely after six of the ten classes because the writing was "too personal." This consideration of how they adapted leaves us still with the question, Why did they respond so differently to the writing? What might have led to such different realizations of the assignments? The answers must lie in who the students were and the experiences and expectations they brought to the class and to the assignment.

Influences on Ways of Adapting

In an ideal world, all students would embrace the conventions of a genre that could help them improve their confidence, fluency, and skill in writing (which the teachers believed engagement with this genre would do). But I am sure that it does not surprise teachers to see that these nine students did not all do so. Just as Fillmore's (1979, 1983) subjects responded in different ways to being asked to learn English, my subjects responded in very different ways to being asked to engage in (and therefore to learn) classroom personal journal writing. In attempting to determine just why these particular students responded in the ways that they did, I found a variety of influences, three of which I want to discuss here, focusing only on those students for which each influence appeared strongest.

Past writing experience. Past writing experience--both amounts and types of experience--seemed to play a major role in students' adaptations to the genre. Raquel and Kaoru had kept personal journals for approximately fifteen years each. Raquel described her journal as her "closest companion" and Kaoru spoke of her journal as similarly important in her life. For them and for Kimiko and Sita, who had also kept journals for shorter periods of time, their journals were places to explore their feelings and reactions

rather than just to record events. Though Irene had never kept a journal or diary, she had used writing for personal, expressive purposes (Britton,1970) in poems, stories, and personal essays that she had written in high school.

In contrast, Alicia and Sunee had had less experience and more limited ranges of experience than the other students writing in any genres in their native languages or in English. Besides a few poems that Alicia had been inspired to write as a young girl, the only personal writing either of them had done was letters. Alicia also had had the least education, having completed high school and taken only a few classes at a community college. Their more limited experiences with writing meant that the genre was very unfamiliar to them, which allowed them to adapt it to their own styles and purposes, ignoring certain features, perhaps more easily than others who had more clearly defined conceptions of what was involved in journal writing. The fact that Alicia had not had extensive experience with university-level writing classes also gave her fewer preconceptions of what the teachers might "want" from her in her writing than someone like Elizabeth, for example, who saw dropping out of the class as her only alternative to giving the teachers what they "wanted."

Those students who had had experience writing in a genre and for functions similar to those of classroom personal journal writing adapted more easily and more completely to what was expected of them--i.e., they performed better and learned more quickly--than those students who had never done personal, reflective writing. A comparison of pieces written by Raquel and Sunee about parents who had died illustrates these differences.

Raquel, Journal #4 - 10/7/85

When I was 21 years of age the most important person in my life, died.

My mother, my sister and I lived in a nice town in my country. Our life was like the life of many working families: my mother worked to support the family and my sister and I studied to be proffesional and to support my mother in her old age. My parents were

divorced since I was ten years old. My father never took out the responsabilities I think that as father he should take. Thus, all the family burden leaned over my mother's shoulders. She spent almost all her life working and working hard to give a good education to her two daughters.

When my mother was going to see the fruit of her efforts in terms of our education, she got a cerebral stroke that put her in 5 days of comma. We were not expecting this hit in our lives. Those days were the worse days in my life. My mother was the most important person in my life. She was the meaning of my existence and I was losing that in those days of agony. The feelings I experimented with in those days were unknown for me. I was rebeled with every thing, especially with God. I didn't understand why that was happening to us. She was too young to die. I was totally unable to stop the death and that made me feel angry when I saw my own weakness in front of the death. Even the doctors couldn't do anything.

After five days, my mother died. The following days and months were months of completely loneliness, sadness, and emptiness. Her absence was evident in every moment of my life.

As the time went by, I got envolved in different activities. The death of my mother left another taste in my life. I started to see the life from another perspective, from the perspective of somebody who had suffered the lose of the beloved one. After that I could understand the suffering of different people because I was sensitive to this. I was alert of when [?] was happening around me and started to rebel against all kind of injustice, oppresion and suffering.

Sunee, Journal #4-10/7

My father used to play an important role in my life. My family has five children. Everyone in the family loves him eventhough he had pass away a couple of years ago.

He was a handsome man and had a loud voice. He had brown skin and a bit bald. He was about 5 feet 10 inches. Because of his character, everyone in the family afraid of him. He supported us to have good education and to save our lifes. He worked hard and took full responsibility of his family. When he was alive, he always taught us to respect to other people, honest to other people, be worked hard, and be a responsible person.

We were not close to him when we were little because he left home for work early in the morning and came home late at night. We were closer to him when we grown up because at that time he had a business at home. He always in a good mood when the business was well, otherwise, he was a serious person. He smoked and drank heavily when he was young. He stopped smoking and drinking when he was fifty-five years old because of his health. No one could stop him before that time. He suffered a lot when he was sick in the hospital for four months until he died. Everyone in my family still respect him because he was our father and he was the one we always love.

Raquel's journal is both representational and reflective. She writes predominantly in first person singular, expresses her feelings through the syntactic structures characteristic of the genre (e.g., *I didn't understand, I saw my own weakness, I started to see the life from another perspective*), and ends the piece by reflecting on the effects on her life of the events she described in the body of the piece. Sunee, on the other hand, includes little reflection or expression of feelings in her piece and never uses first person singular. Though the content is certainly personal, Sunee's piece is much less expressive of her own experiences and reactions than is Raquel's.

Since the teachers did not make evaluative comments about student's journals, Sunee's piece was considered just as acceptable as Raquel's. However, Raquel's conformed more completely to the conventions of the writing which were presented in the class. It may be common sense that students will perform better on a task with which they have had some experience, but if we think about what we expect our students to do in our

classes and the little that we usually know or learn about their past writing experiences, we can see that this common sense is not always applied. That is, we do not always base our expectations of our students on their past writing experiences.

Personality: Self revelation and reflection. Along with other second language acquisition researchers, I have focused on the personality traits that "intuitively strike [me] as important" within the context of my research (Ellis, 1986, p.120). In this case, the ways these students approached classroom personal journal writing was consonant with the degree of self-revelation they engaged in in everyday interactions and in their pasts. This personality trait, like others, is difficult to measure or to isolate, but the contrast between Sita, on the one hand, and Alicia and Sunee, on the other, illustrates it clearly. In interviews, Sita very comfortably and with little elicitation discussed personal events in her life and her feelings about them and about people. She also asked me questions about myself, departing from the strict interviewer-interviewee relationship that we ostensibly had with each other. After the class ended, she went on to graduate school in counseling psychology, planning to be a counselor. One of Sita's journals shows her willingness to engage in the personal, reflective nature of the writing--a letter to her mother, who had died many years before, in which she expressed some very difficult and complex feelings of guilt and sadness and worry that she had let her mother down. Though somewhat less revealing, her piece about the three tragedies that befell her also reflects her willingness to engage in personal, reflective communication (see above).

Alicia also told me about some personal events in her life, but she was much less likely to reveal her feelings about them than was Sita. In interviews, she described her father's disappearance from their farm in El Salvador a few years before, her difficult decision to leave her family and El Salvador to come to the U.S. with her husband, and her parents' fights when she was young. But she very explicitly indicated that she did not want to reflect on past events if they made her sad. In her last interview, she said:

> [In the class], I wrote about my life on the farm, about living with beautiful nature things. Those were the happiest times of my life. I remember unhappy things, but I wouldn't want to write because it's like living it again.... I get upset and cry when I write about bad things. I don't learn anything. I just get upset and start crying.

The entry by Alicia which we saw above mirrors her desire to remember only happy events and to minimize sad ones.

Sunee was even less forthcoming than Alicia. In fact, I learned almost nothing about her life or her feelings in interviews or through reading her journals. In marked contrast to Sita, Sunee seemed to view the interviews only as situations in which I asked questions for which I wanted short, simple, to-the-point answers. She rarely, if ever, elaborated on an answer or expressed her feelings. Again, the journal in which she described her father (see above) mirrors this lack of revelation and personal reflection.

Culture. I have saved for last the one influence that many might imagine to be the major influence on students' adapting to written genres, especially such a personal one as classroom personal journal writing. That influence is culture, by which I mean the set of values, customs, and beliefs learned by growing up within ethnic, religious, and social groups. For these students, cultural background did not, in fact, prove to have a particularly strong influence on their ways of adapting to this type of writing. The most telling example of this lack of influence is the contrast between Sita, who embraced the genre to a greater extent than any other student, and Sunee, who followed only a limited number of the personal, reflective conventions which distinguish this genre from others. We have already seen journals written by these two women which illustrate their very different approaches to the journal writing. Both Sita and Sunee are Thai, both were raised and schooled in Thailand through secondary school, Sita even through the unversity. We might, therefore, expect them to respond to the writing similarly. But we would be wrong. Other factors besides culture clearly had a stronger influence on their engagement with the

genre--influences such as experience with and attitudes toward writing, especially the use of writing as a mode of reflection; age--Sita was 38 and Sunee only 27; personality and the degree of revelation and reflection that they engaged in in their lives and in interactions with other people. Perhaps Sita's status as a permanent resident in the U.S. made her more "Americanized" than Sunee, who was a foreign student planning to return to Thailand. However, they had both been here for a number of years--Sita for 9 and Sunee for 6--and it seems likely that personality and experience may have influenced Sita's acculturation as well as her adaptation to the journal writing rather than the other way around.

The three Japanese women in the study did not respond to writing as differently as did Sita and Sunee, and culture did seem to be a factor for Keiko. Kaoru, Kimiko, and Keiko all struggled with the audience for the writing and ultimately adapted to the conventions. Kaoru's extensive experience with personal, reflective writing in her own personal journal made the adaptation easier for her than for the other two. Kimiko, too, had done some personal writing, which Keiko had not and, overall, she produced a higher proportion of pieces that followed the personal, reflective conventions of the genre. Keiko, who wrote more journals than any other student besides Irene (both wrote 21 pieces), engaged in those conventions selectively. That is, some of her entries involve very little personal reflection; she wrote several entries about such impersonal subjects as the effects of television, the content of a symposium she had attended, and the expense of living in a city. On the other hand, she also wrote about being molested as a child, feeling rejected when her younger sister was born, and being left by a boyfriend. She acknowledged that she had difficulty being "open" in her life and in her writing, attributing that difficulty to Japanese cultural values which, she said, make Japanese people uncomfortable with disclosure. She reported that it was more difficult for her to express her feelings and to "disclose" in Japanese than in English because "there are too many ways to be polite in Japanese." The fact that Kimiko and Kaoru did not have such problems with disclosure and that both said they found it easier to express their feelings in Japanese than in English

may be related to both culture and age: Keiko grew up in a less "open" Japan than did Kimiko and Kaoru, who were eleven years younger than she was.

These comparisons suggest that culture may play a role in students' willingness to engage in a type of writing, but it should not be assumed that cultural background will play the major or even a major role.

Conclusion and Implications

I have discussed three influences on nine ESL students' ways of adapting to a particular written genre--one involving personal content and reflection--in a university context. These influences were: past writing experiences, degrees of self revelation and reflection they engaged in in their lives, and cultural background. Certainly, this is not an exhaustive list; it simply represents major influences I discerned from these nine students. From an in-depth analysis of these students, I have concluded, as many educators and researchers are telling us, that what the students brought to the tasks of learning and participating in a written genre influenced the outcomes of their engagement with those tasks. In other words, the extents to which they did what was expected of them were influenced by a variety of factors outside the control of the teachers and, for that matter, of the students themselves.

Though I have discussed these influences separately, they cannot really be isolated. They work together, interacting in different ways and affecting learners' behavior in different ways. They are elements of what Erickson (1986) has called "meaning perspectives." For example, Raquel's and Kaoru's extensive experiences writing personal, reflective journals in their own native languages led them to see the journal writing in the class differently from other students and to adapt to it more easily than some of those students. The fact that Irene had been forced to abandon her family and country and had faced possible death certainly influenced the content of her journals and what she learned from writing them. The fact that Elizabeth, Keiko, Alicia, and Sunee had not engaged in much self-disclosure or reflection in their lives or in writing made the genre more difficult

for them than for others. The students in my study were "making sense" of the journal writing in different ways, ways that were not always evident from a consideration of their behavior alone. These different ways of making sense appeared to be influenced by their individual experiences, values, and perceptions to a greater extent than by their language or cultural backgrounds or their language proficiencies.

What does all of this mean for the classroom? First of all, these findings corroborate a fact that teachers already know and struggle with regularly: each student is an individual unlike any other. As difficult as it is, we need to treat them as such. In particular in multi-cultural classrooms, we need to be cautious in our reliance on cultural values and customs to explain students' behavior and learning. Assuming that Sita and Sunee would respond to journal writing similarly because they are both Thai women, for example, would have been a gross miscalculation. Culture may play a role, but individual perceptions, experiences, knowledge, values may have a greater influence. In order to help students who are having difficulty with tasks we set for them, we need to consider not only or primarily the cultures that they come from, but also the experiences, knowledge, and values that they have brought to the tasks. While a knowledge of different cultural values can make teachers aware of the influence of culture on individuals, cultural stereotyping can blind them to the myriad of relevant individual experiences and perceptions that influence students' learning.

> Teachers need to be able to use knowledge of culture judiciously in order not to stereotype students but to serve them better; this means using cultural knowledge in conjunction with other types of information related to the content and skills to be taught and individual students' preferences and personalities to promote learning. (McGroarty, 1986, p. 305)

A second conclusion for the classroom that grows directly out of the first is that past writing experience seems to have been one of the most important influences for these students. This suggests that when we are teaching writing, we need to know the kinds and

amounts of writing experiences our students have had and their attitudes toward those experiences. We should not rely on our assumptions about their experiences; we should ask students about them, perhaps in questionnaires or in individual conferences at the beginning of a course. This knowledge will help us predict who will have the most difficulty fulfilling our expectations of the kind of writing we want our students to produce so that we can provide appropriate assistance to those students.

Third, these findings indicate that students respond in different ways to being asked to engage in a particular genre and that they may have difficulty learning not only the formal features of a second language or dialect but also the conventions of the discourse genres of a culture or sub-culture different from their own. Most of the students in the study followed most of the conventions in many of their journals, but they struggled in different ways with being asked to produce personal, reflective writing for an audience. The same sorts of struggles may go on in more traditional classes where students are expected to learn to write academic essays. Since essay writing plays such an important gatekeeping role in our academic system, we need to examine influences on students' engagement with and learning of that genre.

Finally, these findings suggest that extra-linguistic factors are crucial to learning, even for ESL students (see California State Department of Education, 1986, for a volume devoted to the role of such factors in schooling). Our profession has been guided for so long, since its inception in fact, by trends and theories in linguistics that we have a tendency to assume that language is the only or certainly the most relevant ingredient in the teaching and learning of ESL, whether the focus is on written or oral skills. Neither researchers nor teachers can ignore such factors as experience, attitudes, perceptions, and even idiosyncracies if they want to understand students deeply and teach them effectively.

FIGURE 1

Student	Native Country/ Language	Age	Visa Status	Years in U.S.	Education	Native Language Writing Experience (besides school)	Writing Experience in English
Keiko	Japan/ Japanese	36	student	4	State U, Senior in International Communication	freelance for magazine; editor of magazine	school, news-paper article
Kimiko	Japan/ Japanese	25	student	3.5	State U, Senior in Art History	personal letters, letters to editors	letters, school, journal
Sita	Thailand/ Thai	38	permanent resident	9	Thailand, BA, Mass Commun	stories, news articles, journal	some school, journal
Kaoru	Japan/ Japanese	25	student	1	Japan, BA, Sociology; State U, in MA/ TEFL program	journal, poems, letters	school
Sunee	Thailand/ Thai	27	student	6	State U, Senior in Economics	some letters	school, some letters
Irene	Vietnam/ Vietnamese & Chinese	25	citizen	5.5	State U, Junior in Computer Science	poems, essays, stories, letters	school, memos at work
Elizabeth	Philippines/ Tagalog	29	permanent resident	6	Philippines, BS, Chem Engineering	letters to mother	diary, letters, school
Raquel	Puerto Rico/ Spanish	27	citizen	2	Puerto Rico, BA Elementary Ed	journal, notes, letters, poems	letters, school
Alicia	El Salvador/ Spanish	26	permanent resident	7	some courses at Community College	letters, some poems, some at work	letters at work, some school

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